(Neo)Liberal Doses of Inequality: Advance Australia Where?

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Abstract

The relationship between social background and achievement has preoccupied educational researchers since the mid-20th century with major studies in the area reaching prominence in the late 60s. Despite five decades of research and innovation since, recent studies using OECD data have shown that the relationship is strengthening rather than weakening. In this paper, the systematic destabilisation of public education in Australia is examined as a philosophical problem stemming from a fundamental shift in political orientation, where "choice" and "aspiration" work to promote and disguise survivalism. The problem for education however extends far deeper than the inequity in Federal government funding. Whilst this is a major problem, critical scrutiny must also focus on what states can do to turn back aspects of their own education policy that work to exacerbate and entrench social disadvantage.

Competition, Choice and the Chosen

On a warm summer's day in an inner city primary school in Brisbane, toilet blocks perfume the air, few bubblers are running and fans work overtime cutting through air thick with children's sweat. Less than a kilometre away, students at Brisbane Grammar School relax in air-conditioned comfort. Public schools in the sub-tropical state of Queensland have no air-conditioning. Just over the border, air-conditioners protrude from demountable classroom windows in Mullumbimby. Gone it seems is equality in education provision, for not only are schools resourced unequally along public/private divides but now also along spatial/geographical/socioeconomic lines as well.

In Sydney, public schools in the Upper North Shore draw on a wealthy parent body to replace resources leached to illogical funding distribution mechanisms. Recognising that children with learning difficulties remain a reality even when their peers achieve the benchmarks in the Basic Skills Test, in 2003 the P&C Association of East Lindfield Public School donated $30,000 from the $273,000 they had raised to "buy in" a full-time learning support teacher.

On the other side of Sydney's world famous harbour sits a little inner-city primary school with historic buildings and a diverse student body. Forced to rely on a smaller less affluent constituency, the P&C at Forest Lodge Public School did well to raise a total of $27,000 in the same year. The students at Forest Lodge also do well in the BST – for this, however, they suffer because their school community is not able to plug the learning support gap in the way that some in more affluent areas can.

Down the road from Forest Lodge is Glebe Public School. With 40% of its student population drawing from the local public housing estate, Glebe Public faces a reality far removed from that of either Forest Lodge or East Lindfield. As a recipient of the Priority-School Funding program Glebe Public may receive additional funding, however, an educational market-place means that schools have to compete with each other by being seen as "better" than the alternative. Despite the re-badging that deleted "Disadvantaged" from the title, being known as a "priority-school" is hardly a marketing point.

The question is: How *did* Australia get to the point where schools like East Lindfield, Forest Lodge and Glebe Public are pitched against each other in a competitive education market-place?

Introduction

In Australia, the introduction of neoliberal market policies to public education under the banner of "parent choice" and "competition" has resulted in growing social inequality and disadvantage. Whilst the distribution of educational achievement is not as inequitable here as the US and UK, OECD data from consecutive TIMMS and PISA studies show there is a definite gap *and* in some cases it is widening (McGaw, 2005). Moreover, international comparative data shows that market systems unmediated by social policy, epitomised by systems in the countries towards the right of the political scale, fail to provide equality of access much beyond formal or simple terms. Alternatively, social democratic nations such as the Nordic countries, which employ a policy mix towards the centre-left of the social investment scale, appear to realise excellence in educational achievement and a more equitable distribution of results (Graham, 2007).

A recent review of curriculum and equity using OECD data (Luke, Graham, Sanderson, Voncina & Weir, 2006) found that nations with neutralist governance models sitting towards the right of the political spectrum populate the high-quality/low-equity quarter of McGaw's (2006a) equity/quality quadrant. Those employing social democratic policy mixes, like that exemplified by the Nordic Model, tend to occupy the high-quality/high-equity corner. In addition, research literature reporting on the relationship between the introduction of market policy and the trend towards inequitable distribution in educational achievement is beginning to emerge from South Korea, Japan and Norway – joining long-standing literature from the UK and New Zealand (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Robertson & Dale, 2002).

In this paper, the systematic destabilisation of public education in Australia is examined as a philosophical problem stemming from a fundamental shift in political orientation, where "choice" and "aspiration" work to promote naked ambition and disguise survivalism. This is particularly the case in education. In response to Federal government promotion of privatisation and the pressures of declining tax revenue, state governments have introduced policies designed to claw back "market share", and streamline public education as a valued "brand," whilst ensuring cost efficiency to the tax-payer who is treated more and more like a public shareholder. All of this and more has deepened the exposure of neighbourhood schools to direct competition with a better-funded, better-positioned independent school sector.

In what follows, I examine changes in the political and economic climate which have contributed to a reworking of our cultural and social imaginary. Unlike most commentators of late however, I see no effective solution in short-sighted critique of Federal government funding inequity (Ferrari, 2007). Although I would argue that Commonwealth contributions towards the cost of educating Australia's children should be equally split between the independent, Catholic and public sectors, my contention here is that many problems like school residualisation will not be resolved unless state governments urgently address their own "parent choice" and "school competition" policies which encourage practices of social distinction and compound their effects (Ball, 2003). The repercussions of this bear not only upon school responsibilities and performance but have long-term implications in terms of a future citizenry and the continuance of liberal democracy in Australia.

Whilst Australian schools and teachers have so far been plugging the gap between increasing expectations and decreasing resources, they cannot do it forever. Ultimately, schools can do little to address the yawning divide in educational achievement unless our governments realise that high quality and high equity in education are inconsistent with a political rationality that sees education simply as an imprecise and costly economic lever (Luke et al., 2006). This speaks in part to the philosophical foundations now underpinning the provision of public education in Australia and the erosion of a once proud egalitarian state (Argy, 2003). Whilst Australian culture may never have been as "other-regarding" as the Nordic cultures (Offe, 2003), the ethos of a "fair go for all" was, until recently, an enduring faith subscribed to by many.

Part I: Changing the Country

Although "old-style Australian egalitarianism was fraught with internal contradictions," (Argy, 2003, p. xiii) a commitment towards fairness in the treatment of the not-so-lucky has been a feature of public policy in the "lucky country" since World War II. Whilst never a "great paragon of virtue and social justice" (p. xiii), successive state and federal governments have introduced policies designed to counter institutionalised discrimination against low-skilled workers, non-whites, women and people with a disability. Active investment in the form of a social wage through quality universal schooling and broader access to higher education, legal aid, Medicare, economic redistribution through a progressive tax system, employment protection laws and a wages accord was designed to provide a comprehensive safety net for the more vulnerable members of society.

Some political commentators have since argued that the post-war settlement has been responsible for a decline in standards and a culture of mediocrity. Conservative governments since the late 70s have thus dismantled many of the egalitarian frameworks put in place to respond to the problem of social, economic and educational inequality. The move towards economic liberalism, deregulation and competition in global markets has seen the gradual incorporation of "a range of other effective, market-based, non-distorting instruments of redistribution" -- strengthening the economy while making "egalitarianism more economically affordable" (Argy, 2003, p. xiii).

> For a time it seemed that Australia might strike the 'trifecta' — an economic renaissance, a broad sharing of the productivity gains and a high level of social mobility with more equal opportunity. But it was not to be. Australia is in many key respects a less egalitarian society today than it has ever been in its history. (Argy, 2003, p. xiii)

In the lead-up to the 1996 Federal election, the then incumbent Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating warned Australians: "If you change the government, you change the country". Unfortunately for Keating, this turned out to be exactly what the majority of Australian voters intended. Keating painted a big picture for the country, whereas the conservative John Howard promised a quieter, more leisurely ride. The '96 Federal election ended in a landslide, ushering in the conservative Liberal/National Coalition party led by Howard. Keating lost the election principally as a result of an aggressive economic reform agenda and the recession he claimed Australia had to have. Although this was an event of international proportion, voters held the successive Hawke/Keating Labor governments responsible because of those reform agendas that were seen by many to end her run as the "lucky country," increasing our exposure and vulnerability to international competition and market forces. One could be forgiven for asking if the people got what they bargained for, as eleven years later, Australia is a very different place.

The direction and extent of change under the Howard Government has pushed this country far towards the right; launching a deep assault upon the post-war welfare settlement and increasing division between the haves and the have-nots (Pusey, 2003; Hamilton & Maddison, 2007; Marr, 2007). Sensing the insecurity of a country regularly punching above its weight, the Government has continued to campaign on an economic platform built on the promise of low interest rates, high employment and low inflation. Recent history reveals however that prior to election day, the rhetoric of economic management is deafening but policy – how that management is to be achieved – is revealed only after the deal is done. The Australian people could again be forgiven for feeling that in 2001 and 2004 they voted for a government that played above the table on its "economic credentials" but beneath dealt cards delivering deep racial and social division. The hot-button issues were interest rates, illegal aliens, queue jumpers and terrorists. In their shadow were complicated problems like cyclical poverty and social disadvantage, the absolute neglect of indigenous peoples, the growing gap between rich and poor and the contribution of policy structures strongly influenced by neoliberal fundamentalism.

Whilst the terms economic rationalism and neoliberalism are often used interchangeably, there is a subtle difference. In a genealogy of economic rationalist theory, Quiggin (1997, p. 1) describes how economic rationalism emerged in the 1970s as a form of critical and sceptical thinking that was:

> …gradually replaced by a dogmatic, indeed, quasi-religious, faith in market forces and in the supreme importance of "efficiency" and "competition". More and more, economic analysis was based on deductions from supposedly self-evident truths, which were effectively immune from any form of empirical testing. Thus, economic rationalism now has very little to do with rational debate… [and] is anything but reasonable. It leads to a situation where absurd beliefs can be maintained in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

As a linguistic term, neoliberalism (understood here as shorthand for "neoliberal fundamentalism") more aptly signifies the form of thinking that has since evolved; the beginnings of which were first embraced by the Hawke/Keating Government during the 1980s. Since 1996 however, the Howard/Costello government has been an eager tail to the neoliberal dog. Policy development under the conservative Coalition Government is more the second-hand product of right-wing neoliberal think-tanks, such as the Centre for Independent Studies and the Institute of Public Affairs. While the alleged ambit of neoliberal market policy is to reduce the size of a "cumbersome" and "inefficient" state by opening public services to competition, the result instead has been a deflection of responsibility and the devolution of accountability for "society" onto communities and individuals. Perhaps this is what was meant by Thatcher's enigmatic comment, "There is no such thing as society: there are only individuals and families."

Part II: Neoliberalism in Education

The effect of neoliberal fundamentalism upon government thinking has extended to the schooling of our children. Viewed historically as a public good, education is now seen as a positional good to be bid for in an educational market-place. In 1999, the Federal government changed its funding allocation procedure 'which saw private-school funding boosted considerably' through an SES model which has co-opted the language of equity to give 'the greatest boost to wealthy private schools' (Ashbolt, 2007, p. 88). The Federal Government indicated in the 2007 Budget that this policy direction will continue, despite increasing criticism of the inequity involved. In a report responding to the 2007 Federal Budget release, Devereaux (2007, p. 1) notes that Commonwealth funding 'to private schools will increase by 30% from 2006-07 to 2010-11, compared to 10% for government schools'. In pure dollars this increase to private schools is estimated to be $1.7 billion (from $5.8 to 7.5 billion) whereas public schools will receive an increase of $300 million (from $3.1 to 3.4 billion).

To put this in perspective: since the Howard government amended the funding mechanism the Commonwealth now 'spends more on non-government schools than it does on universities: $4.8 billion on non-government schools compared with $3.5 billion on universities in 2005' (McGaw, 2007, p. 25). Another way of looking at it is this: roughly two-thirds of Commonwealth Government funding goes to independent schools and one third to government schools, however, public schools educate approximately two thirds of the nation's children, whereas the independent school sector caters for only a third (Bonnor & Caro, 2007). Public schools also enrol the majority of students who are hard to teach: those with disabilities, the socially disadvantaged, children of refugee status and non-English speaking background, children in remote areas and indigenous children. These are the young people who need to gain the most from their educational experience. Those who need the most from education now receive the least.

Instead of focusing on lifting the floor and filling the gaps as does Finland, education policy in Australia (both state and federal) is residualising educational provision; creating gated academic compounds in some areas to leave ghettos in others. The situation has long existed where elite private schools overshadow their public neighbours, however, the adoption of competition policy by state governments has pitched public

against public. This is particularly evident in New South Wales. Along the north-shore train line in Sydney, the bar is set high by no less than nine elite private schools drawing from a 12 kilometre stretch of privileged suburbia. The NSW Department of Education offers two academically selective schools in the area – Normanhurst Boys and Hornsby Girls.

Successful government schools like Killara High and the Wahroonga Bush School are spruiked in local real estate advertisements and this is reflected in the cost of housing within popular school catchment areas. However, only some can afford to live in them. As I recently discovered myself, rents for property within the Forest Lodge catchment are significantly higher than those within Glebe itself. Those who can afford it can buy their way into the school of their choice. In Sydney, the rental shortage has led to the emergence of bidding auctions where prospective tenants bid higher weekly rents in order to secure a desired property (Markson, 2006). There are clear winners and losers in this game. The application of competition policy and parent choice to education markets is fundamentally flawed because it opens up avenues that can be exploited by individuals with more economic, cultural and social capital.

In a study examining the associated cost of housing with desirable school catchment zones, Davidoff and Leigh report that quality public education is not actually "free", and that "[n]ot only can poor families not afford access to private schools, they are often also locked out of the best public schools" (Davidoff & Leigh, 2006, p. 1). This is somewhat contentious because some schools in disadvantaged areas are doing tremendous things. To acknowledge this in its own analysis and reporting, NSW DET has moved towards comparison of "like schools" and the observation of "value added" data, which is considered more representative of individual school effectiveness. Parent choice and school popularity does not necessarily reflect that one school is better than another, nor that the teaching in the popular school is superior. What it does reflect is social exclusivity and the grass-roots response by parents to the phenomenon reported by Barry McGaw. While McGaw (2006b, p. 1) states that "good company confers little educational advantage on socially advantaged students; poor company confers a large additional educational disadvantage on already socially disadvantaged students", many parents are not prepared to take the risk that their children will not be negatively influenced by the children of others. Parent choice policy places direct pressure on sensitive buttons for parents already worried about their children's future in a rapidly changing world in which good educational credentials are vital to avoid being locked out of the new knowledge-economy.

As a result of the drift to private schools, some local comprehensive schools experience a squeeze effect with some seen as viable alternatives and others as a last resort. Competition from the private sector (and from within their own ranks) structures the behaviour and strategy of public schools. For example when interviewed recently, the principal of Killara High, said that because KHS is surrounded by some of the top independent schools in the state, they "cannot afford to be complacent" and "have to continue to be innovative to increase our enrolments" (Ham, 2007, p. 6). This is the desired effect of school marketisation. The theory is that sluggish public services must be forced to remain innovative through direct competition with the private sector. However, the assumption being made when business models are applied to schooling, is that if we just fiddle with this lever at the right time, then the end product will be the same. But schools are not McDonald's franchises. Across Australia the ingredients for McDonald's burgers are the same quality, are cooked exactly the same way, with the same high-end equipment. No matter how standardised the process, schooling will never produce exactly the same results with every student because human beings are naturally diverse and affected by their social and economic environment, as well as their genes. Children from disadvantaged areas bring a differently coloured palette to school than do those from advantaged areas; to ignore this is to individualise success and failure, negate the effects of poverty and privilege and disguise the compounding effects of public policy.

> Instead of concentrating on parental choice, surely the primary focus of any sane education system would be on raising the education of all communities, especially in bring up the bottom. Tragically, at the moment, public policy is doing the reverse – creating inequity and division,

> advantaging those better off, and stripping less well-off communities of their remaining social capital. (Bonnor & Caro, 2007, p. 139-140)

Objections to such demands for equity have been shrill and somewhat disingenuous. Arguing that the Australian Education Union was misleading the public in a recent television campaign, Kevin Donnelly (2007) dismissed the detail of the funding split entirely, stating "[i]gnored is the fact state governments are primarily responsible for school education and the criticism that state Labor governments have failed to properly resource schools, both government and non-government". However, in Australia these schools enjoy significant government funding, yet retain levels of autonomy and shelter from scrutiny that is denied to public schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007). Former school principal, Chris Bonnor (2007, p. 34) mounts a convincing case then, when he says that:

> …the manner in which government funded private schools are resourced and permitted to operate has allowed substantial advantages to accrue to particular groups of schools and increased the relative disadvantages faced by others, including – but not restricted to – government schools.

Donnelly also fails to acknowledge the inequitable tax revenue base of the Federal and State governments. As Greg Craven (2007) recently put it in a National Press Club address, the Commonwealth is awash with cash whereas the (Labor) states have a much leaner wallet with which they must attempt the thankless job of service delivery. When they stumble, they provide opportunities for political point-scoring. Not surprisingly, the current Federal government in charge of the Commonwealth has no interest in balancing the books through cooperative Federalism. It could easily do so but with Labor governments entrenched in every Australian territory, struggling state-run public services obviously serve a short-term purpose more politically expedient than the long-term health and capacity of Australia's human and social capital.

That being said, the Federal Government is not alone responsible for inequity in education and Donnelly does have a point. At the same time, state Labor governments have employed economic rationalism in the development of education policy. "Competition" and "parent choice" are terms used equally as often in state Labor government policy discourse as "cost-neutral" and "market share". Not only do these sit awkwardly alongside remarks about social justice and equal opportunity but they indicate just how far neoliberal dogma has infiltrated public discourse and affected the capacity of our leaders to think differently. Whilst many Australians on the left of far-right may be collectively holding their breath for the 2007 Federal election result, they may be hoping in vain.

Whose 'ism?

Riding on an election ticket that promises an "Education Revolution" the Australian Labor Party (ALP) has gained a lot of mileage in the opinion polls by offering a sprinkling of rain to the parched, however, closer analysis indicates that education systems in Australia will most likely remain in drought - regardless of who wins this year. The real question is how extreme that drought will be. In full retreat from the beleaguered "private school hit list" of the failed 2004 election campaign, Education Shadow Minister Stephen Smith stated that 'the old comparisons between the public and private or between states or with spending in previous years were no longer appropriate' (Hewett, 2007b, p. 7). Despite evidence to the contrary from the US and UK (The Economist, 2006; Aitken, 2007), Smith cited the adage that 'a rising tide lifts all boats', while advocating comprehensive investment in education at all levels to extend Labor's 'education agenda beyond the traditional appeal to social equity and individual opportunity'; preferring to sell education as a solution to Australia's declining productivity levels and a 'direct route to the country's economic success' (Hewett, 2007a, p. 21).

Smith's comments are echoed by Shadow Treasurer Wayne Swan who recently recanted his earlier position on economic fundamentalism saying, 'things have moved on from the early 1990s' (Wade, 2007, p. 50). In 1992, Swan sensibly rejected the 'laissez-faire economic bullshit we had in the 1980s because markets don't, on their own, allocate resources either efficiently or fairly' (p. 50). A year later he was also reported as saying that 'the world was retreating from "economic fundamentalism that left too much human debris in the wake of unrestricted market reforms"' (p. 50). Whether Swan really has sold his soul to the far-right still remains to be seen. If the ALP wins the Federal election then we may then see a softening in the recent language of the hard-line and hear more about the ALP 'priorities for extra resources… primary schools, particularly government schools in lower socioeconomic areas, rural and indigenous education and special needs' (Hewett, 2007a, p. 21). Unlike his Government counterpart, Smith does at least appear to be listening to the latest research evidence. While attempting to emulate the current Government as strong "economic managers" and "fiscal conservatives", Smith recalls in relation to his own education portfolio, that 'our best and brightest do well internationally but we have too many kids who don't do well enough' (p. 21). Unless an ALP Federal government recognises the role that school funding policy plays however, that situation will continue.

Under the current Howard government, successive Education Ministers have referred to a "politics of envy" to counteract justice claims however, empirical data now shows plainly that government policies (both federal and state) are exacerbating educational disadvantage in Australia (Luke et al., 2006). As long ago as 1968 in the US, the Coleman study demonstrated that heterogeneous student populations were more productive than homogenous groupings. Overt streaming practices came under scrutiny and comprehensive schooling models promoted because the research evidence showed that socially and academically disadvantaged kids benefited from mixing with advantaged peers. The same body of research also showed that academically advantaged kids suffer no ill consequences when educated in mixed populations (Coleman, Campbell, Holson, McPartland & Mood, 1966; Coleman, 1968; 1973). Recent research still supports this (McGaw, 2005; Luke et al., 2006; McGaw, 2006a). One reason that Finland does so well in international comparative assessments is because their comprehensive schooling model is supported by open access to meaningful learning support structures. As McGaw notes,

> Finland provides additional support to more than 35 per cent of its students in their first year of school (at age seven) to ensure that all build good foundations for further learning. The rate drops away after the first year but remains above 15 per cent of students receiving additional support in regular schools to age 15. (McGaw, 2007, p. 25).

The distribution of educational achievement in Australia, the UK, the UK, US and Germany is significantly less equitable than Finland. In these countries, 'social background is more substantially related to educational achievement than in the OECD as a whole' (McGaw, 2006a, p. 11). It is worth citing McGaw's observations in full here:

> The gap in educational achievement between socially disadvantaged students in Germany and similarly socially disadvantaged students in Finland and Korea represents around three years of schooling. More detailed analysis of the German data shows the pattern to be strongly related to the organisation of schooling. From age 11, students are separated into vocational and academic schools of various types on the basis of the educational future judged to be most appropriate for them. Students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds generally end up in low-status vocational school and achieve poor educational results. Students from socially advantaged backgrounds are directed to high-status academic schools where they achieve high-quality results. The schooling system largely reproduces the existing social arrangements, conferring privilege where it already exists and denying it where it does not. (McGaw, 2006, p. 11)

Ability streaming is not the only factor exacerbating inequity in educational achievement. Recent research investigating the relationship between curriculum and equity found that overt streaming practices can have

differential effects and that social capital and service infrastructure also play a large part (Luke et al., 2006). Problematically for the countries leaning towards the far-right, the neoliberalisation of public policy results not only in defacto streaming but a deterioration of the social infrastructure necessary to buffer kids from the negative effects of disadvantage. The application of competition policy in the guise of "parent choice" exposes vulnerable groups and individuals to the full vagaries of an unequal playing field. The federal funding public/private split is only one aspect of the problem: state government policies that aim to claw back market share by offering "opportunity classes" in primary schools, and academically selective high schools are another. Even more fundamentally, the under-funding of public education overall contributes to a situation whereby government schools are forced to prioritise initiatives and access to support programs, as well as raise external funding through their local community. This dire state of affairs, long noted by teachers and "educationists" alike, is now being noticed by other interest groups. As education editor for the Australian Financial Review Luke Slattery (2007, p. 40) writes:

> The Business Council of Australia recently released a report on the future of Australian schooling which calls for a big increase in public investment in schools, and voices fears lost to education… The reasons for this are pretty clear. The pursuit of an ideology of choice, irrespective of its social consequences, has resulted in the marginalisation of the government school sector and a deepening divide, as registered in OECD reading-proficiency tests, between high-low performers. Our poorly performing students are being left behind, as are the bulk of government schools.

To return to the scenario painted in the introduction to this paper, some schools are fortunate in this regard: Petrie Terrace State School in inner-city Brisbane is lucky that it has a large oval close to Suncorp Stadium. Brisbane City Council issues prohibitive fines for parking in restricted areas within the Central Zone. Some years ago, an innovative parent came up with the idea of renting parking space during sporting events and concerts held at Suncorp. Petrie Terrace now earns about $30,000 pa through this parking venture. Many schools are not so fortunate. Others, like East Lindfield, can rely on the affluence of their parent communities and the professional expertise those parents can bring to the school community. For example, East Lindfield P&C has its own Public Relations Committee headed up by the wife of one of the Principals of a prestigious and highly successful Sydney public relations firm. Whilst this is great for schools like East Lindfield, the coupling of such advantages with competition policy assists in the reproduction of existing social arrangements, again "conferring privilege where it already exists and denying it where it does not" (McGaw, 2006, p. 11).

The consequence of this for educational quality has been noted elsewhere, however to move the discussion beyond OECD placements for a moment, the truly worrying thing is that education is constitutive of persons and of societies (Jonathon, 1997). The quality of our public schools and the education they provide our young people has a long-lasting effect, not only upon their ability to engage in higher-order tasks and become the much vaunted "knowledge-workers" of the future, but also upon the way these citizens of the future might conceive of their responsibility towards others and direct the future of this country.

Part III: Where to from here?

Imagine this: The Kindergarten children of 2007 will enter their final year of schooling in 2019. By 2039, many of these young people will have become parents themselves and may have children of their own. They will have their own problems to deal with because (at the rate we're going) housing in capital cities will be completely unaffordable, rising sea levels will have swamped Sydney's waterfront, and fallout from nuclear reactors will increase UV radiation by 2000%. Public education will be a quaint idea from the past, as virtual school vouchers were introduced in 2022. Online life-long learning packages are administered by government accredited backpackers. While outwardly extolling the virtues of "progress", the Kindy kids of 2007 sense an occasional tweak of discomfort when they remember the fun they had with their friends at a

place called school. Geriatric academics shake their heads and speak in hushed tones at barbeques, in fear of being branded "postmodernists" in need of re-programming at Belief Modification Centres. Equally wary of the BMCs, the parents of today's Kindy kids are in their 60s and 70s, wondering what the hell happened to the world during their watch. Adding to their concerns is a rapidly declining birth rate which, coupled with an ageing population means that today's Kindy kids will shoulder more of the labour force and tax burden than their parents ever did. Innovative policy initiatives to deal with the problem are in high demand.

What will the "self-regarding" frameworks we have in place today mean for *us* when we are no longer in control of public policy decisions? Are we thinking about the consequences that the production and promotion of a "what's in it for me" mentality may have long-term? What of the parents working today whose superannuation savings fail to provide them with enough to live on? Will today's Kindergarten children become the policy hardheads of the future who decide to couple the right to "choose" euthanasia with a strategy of public welfare reduction? As Michael Moore (2007) put it recently, what the neoliberalised countries of the West currently lack is a mentality of "we, not me".

Aspirationalism or Survivalism?

After the 1996 election, the Howard government decimated the traditional ALP stronghold by capturing the vote of ordinary working Australians. They did this in two ways: first by trading on post-recession labour market vulnerability that persisted despite drops in interest rates and unemployment. Business cooperated by employing more part-timers and casuals, and increasing pressure on full-time employees to work harder for longer to increase individual productivity. However Labor's deregulation of the financial markets during the 1980s, together with low interest rates from the early 1990s meant that money was cheaper and easier to come by. An ensuing property boom in the late 90s saw ordinary Australians buying up big, particularly in the outskirts of major cities. As housing prices rose, mortgage brokers leveraged higher and higher loans through unprecedented lending practices. Where once a 20% deposit and a repayment amount of no more than 30% of gross salary was the limit, borrowers were accessing loans of up to 100% of property value - many of which ate more than 40% of the repayment capacity for a dual-income household.

The Howard Government won the 1998 Federal election on a margin of 1% after the introduction of a highly unpopular Goods and Services Tax (Newman, 1998). It was able to do so by capitalising on the vulnerability of these ordinary Australians through a politics of fear: the threat under Labor was higher interest rates and taxes, unemployment, unionism and 'big' government. When the Coalition looked like it might be in trouble in the lead up to the 2001 election, Howard was able to point to the looming threat of economic insecurity in the form of the Asian economic and dot.com meltdowns, and national security after 9/11 and the Tampa refugee crisis (Hamilton & Maddison, 2007; Marr, 2007). The impact of these events upon the national psyche and the pent-up state of anxiety they produced is evident in the findings from large-scale surveys (Pusey, 2003; Wilson, Meagher, Gibson, Denemark & Western, 2005), but also in the little conversations that take place about education in local cafes and playgrounds.

In 2003, I sat stunned listening to a group of wealthy north-shore playgroup mothers describe their strategies for school entry. Their sons, like mine, were between 12 and 18 months old. As I watched my son blissfully rolling around in the sandpit, I listened to these mothers describe how they were planning to hold their boys back from starting Kindergarten, because when they played rugby in the GPS competition they wanted to them to be able to compete with the "imported" kids. In another part of Sydney, a good friend told me that she had to send her daughter to Kindy, even though the preschool teachers said she wasn't ready because they just could not afford another year of child care. She was nervously vacillating between the local public school and a more distant Christian school but, in the end, the decision was made easier with the consideration of cost. Two years later she got a higher paying job (much further away from home) and enrolled both her daughters in the independent school.

The Howard government has described such tactics as "aspirationalism" and has vigorously marketed their policy of increased private school funding as enabling a parent's right to choose an appropriate educational package for their child. Aspirationalism is viewed as an admirable pursuit; reminiscent of the "great Australian dream" where you can own your own home and rise to the top through hard work and "a fair go". The fact that for there to be a top there must also be a bottom and to get there one must trample on the hopes and dreams of others is an aspect little discussed in public discourse. One reason why is that those doing the clambering are terrified of becoming trampled themselves or for their children to end up on the bottom of the heap because their parents somehow failed to ensure their ascension on the educational ladder to social success.

Conclusion: Getting the balance right

It is important to point out that the problems caused by marketisation in public education result from policies and practices deployed by state systems struggling to respond to the drift towards private schools. While this battle between public and private did not begin with the Howard government, Federal funding policy over the last decade has certainly exacerbated the situation. It would be easy to point the finger purely at the Federal funding model and independent schools but I would argue that this is a reductionist response and one that has proved unpopular with the electorate. Proposals to reduce funding to these schools have met strong opposition and this is not surprising. Parents who have bought into the rhetoric of "choice" would rightly feel cheated if they now were to have that choice removed. The public policy challenge now is to adequately support public schooling (from both the Federal and state purse) so that parents are presented with a genuine choice.

Parents should continue to be free to choose between systems for religious reasons, however, no longer should parents feel compelled to choose between private schools for survivalist reasons. Evidence from the Nordic countries shows that "parent choice" is rendered irrelevant when the best schools in the nation are equalled by their local comprehensive (Luke et al., 2006). However, this is where the fundamental problem lies. Even if the next Federal government were to equalise Federal funding allocations (and I strongly suggest they do) how do the states retreat from school marketisation? How do we put the beast back into its cage? In all the recent media comment on the public/private funding split in Australia, this is the one question commentators have failed to ask, but also the one in most need of an urgent response. What we need now is a cooperative Federal government that is prepared to back the states in a truly visionary education revolution – one that restores public education; supporting and developing it to a standard that the independents aspire to match.

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